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ABSTRACT

Adoption by the local school board of a new student discipline and conduct code required by the state department of education generated conflict in a rural community around the values inherent in the discipline of young people. Discipline was narrowly defined by community members in terms of establishment of order, adult control, and student acquiescence. The issue was the extent to which youth should and could be punished by local school officials. Background information is supplied on the community and on the local ministerial association that focused the opposition to the adoption of the code. Past occurrences are analyzed and possible social and political impacts resulting from the lack of conflict resolution are examined in terms of current community conflict theory.
(Author/MLF)

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SCHOOL-COMMUNITY CONFLICT:

Discipline

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I

Small, self-contained economy towns can generate intense responses to incidents related to the economy or to values such as religion or subversion causing splits just as suburbs are split.[1] One such small, self-contained, rural town in an agricultural environment generated conflict around the values inherent in the discipline of its youth. The event was the adoption by the local school board of a new student discipline and conduct code being required by the State Department of Education. The issue was the extent to which youth should and could be punished by local school officials.

Discipline has several definitions and various shades of implied behavior.[2] One authority lists six separate uses of discipline in education:

1. the process or result of directing or subordinating, immediate wishes, impulses, desires, or interests for the sake of an ideal or for the purpose of gaining more effective, dependable action;
2. persistent, active, and self-directed pursuit of some considered course of action in the face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty;

3. direct authoritative control of pupil behavior through punishments and/or rewards;
4. negatively, any restraint of impulses, frequently through distasteful or painful means;
5. a branch of knowledge;
6. a course of training designed to develop a mental or physical ability or an attitude.

The issue here centers on the direct authoritative control of pupil behavior as in the third definition above, focusing most clearly on the control of student behavior in and about the school facilities during school time. Quiet classrooms, empty hallways, quiet voices, students in lines, and polite encounters with visitors would be signs accepted as good discipline. Students appearing on downtown streets, boisterous adolescent behavior, students out of classroom seats and loitering in school hallways would be signs of weak discipline.

Whereas self-discipline can be defined as control of conduct exercised not by an external authority, but by the learner who accepts a task as his own including whatever effort is involved and controls his activities accordingly,[3] this writer has never detected a school-community issue of discipline that revealed concern for student self-control, development of responsibility or fostering of creative experiences. Discipline is narrowly defined in terms of establishment of order, adult control, and student acquiescence. Testimonial letters from patrons who observe good behavior

are read at school board meetings. And, a teacher's complaint about a polite, but direct student was that, "He treated me as an equal, and I don't want students to be my equal." Punishment is administered fairly and consistently, but only when students break adults' rules, not when adults break student rules or even when students break student rules.

This analysis of the school community issue is based on the punitive definition of discipline that pervades the community and influences the school.

The discipline issue is a procedural issue as implied in the contextual definition. The evidence is collected in terms of community complaints about students who are truant, students who are fighting, students who hassel fellow students, and teachers who allow students to leave their seats, their classrooms, their buildings. The school principal when hired is clearly directed to maintain order in the building, punish the wayward and to "run a tight ship."

There are substantive elements in the discipline policy that guarantee certain student rights such a freedom of speech, freedom to learn without harassment and freedom to appear as their life-style dictates.[4] The procedural elements out number and out weigh the substantive elements, however, because the orientation of the community influence causes the school people to act on the procedures, and pay only lip service to the substance.

The claim made here that the discipline issue is procedural is supported by the evidence that students are suspended and

expelled from school for breaking behavior rules or for not attending classes, but not case exists where a student has been expelled for failure to learn. Evidence is available to show that teachers have been released for breaking moral codes or failing to maintain "good discipline", but no case exists where a teacher has been released for poor teaching. Transcripts of interviews with prospective administrators would show that successful candidates promise to establish order.[5] There is little evidence to show promises made to create a viable learning climate that encourages success, but understands failure; that promotes civilized behavior, but anticipates inconsistencies; and that provide responsible models, but accepts not blame for student transgression.

The discipline issue in its broadest definition including both external and internal controls is educational. The discipline each individual must exert internally is vital to learning at all levels whether cognitive, affective, or psycho-motor. The substantive matters of freedom to learn and grow are basic to education and required facets of educational institutions. Self-discipline can be taught and responsibility is a proper educational topic.

However, in the narrow definition offered for the issue here between school and community, the matter is political in the sense that political behavior is an attempt to gain from someone else for one's own good. The community influences the school to adopt its values and orientation in the manner of a conflict model of society suggested by Dodson[6] wherein

decisions are made collectively by participatory set of actors who have an equity in the issues. Dodson continues by stating that it is no longer possible for a board of education to make decisions unilaterally; even though it is legal to do so, it will have no legitimacy in a large portion of the community.[7] The school normally accepts this assumption for survival. When suggested guidelines from the State Department of Education influence the school to pay more attention to freedom and student rights, the backlash from the community, again, is political.

Discipline is political in that it is the instrument of government (school is the government, in this case) for controlling its constituents. The school as government legislates, administers, and judges the behavior of students. The behavior is political.

Another dimension of the discipline issue is seen in terms of norms. The matter is normative and the norms are set in school board policy, published in student handbooks, mailed to parents, and posted on school bulletin boards. The norms, historically, arise from Judeo-Christian traditions having passed through Puritannical practices and into the hands of middle-class, conservative, achievement-oriented, value sponsors.

The current standards were developed by a student-parent-teacher committee appointed by the School Board. This ad hoc committee developed rules based on consideration of recent court litigation and State Department of Education

recommendations about what rules, and procedures are legally defensible, guarantee due process, and protect student rights. These two sources were the only empirical contributions. The deliberations and final product were mainly guided by individual value positions, hearsay, amateur psychology and compromising. The empirical contributions acted as restraints on intense beliefs and affective judgements about students behavior and the manner in which it should be controlled.

The discipline policy delineates the many facets of unacceptable behavior and conduct which represent standards and norms which if followed obediently will create the image of a moral person, but reveal little about what it is to be educated and responsible for one's own actions.

II

The organization that focused the opposition to the adoption of a new student discipline and conduct code is a local ministerial association. There is a historical background of hostility and misunderstanding in the relations between Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, wherein basic doctrinal differences as to the status of Jesus, the scriptures, the church, and the clergy have caused much friction in times past. Increasingly, an attitude of tolerance

of doctrinal differences has arisen. The different religious faiths do not minimize their doctrinal differences, but have learned to get along with each other despite these differences, giving rise to ecumenical associations. This process of interfaith cooperation has been aided by the search for common areas of basic values on which the major faiths largely agree, and by the experience of interfaith cooperation in various types of social endeavor in the community.[8]

A ministerial association is difficult to classify in terms of organizational theory.[9] Blau and Scott list five basic types of organizations:

1. The voluntary association of equals, where members freely join for a specific purpose; examples include sects, clubs, and professional associations.
2. The military model which emphasizes a fixed hierarchy of authority and status.
3. The philanthropic model, consisting of a governing lay board, an itererant professional staff, and clients served such as hospitals and universities.
4. The corporation model with its stockholder, board of directors, managers, and staff.
5. The family business.

The local ministerial association would seem to fit best in the first class of voluntary associations of equals, if for no other reason than it doesn't fit any of the other classes.

The local ministerial association holds one over-arching umbrella substantive objective in the individual members' belief that a Christian religion is vital to an ethical, moral, and psiritual existence. The organization of local ministers meets monthly without by-laws, rules, written objectives or guidelines. In the membership of the association, each representing substantial congregations, are found concommitant membership in other civic, business, and charitable organizations increasing the communications network of one small organization and creating inter-locking membership. Coleman[10] states that:

> "Organizational affiliations and informal relations provide the chain which links different members of the community together; if these affiliations are confined mostly within ethnic groups, and economic strata, or religious groups, and fail to tie these groups to one another, the lines of cleavage are already set."

This seems important here as it may provide insight into the static nature of the community conflict at a stage less than full scale conflict. The inter-locking memberships would seem to offer power to arrest or instigate the conflict.

A second factor adding importance is that the ministerial association is the only local group with which the school administration schedules regular meetings.

The association objectives tend to be general in view of the lack of formal organizational structure, written rules,

by-laws, and stated goals. The general understanding of objectives rests entirely in the minds of those present at meetings. As membership changes over time, the objectives change, but only slightly. As the annually-elected president changes the informal procedures may change. As community issues, civic and moral, change there is shifting of objectives to accomodate current issues or needs.

The variance in value orientation of the members would seem to preclude the development of specific objectives with the exception of procedural rules which they choose to avoid.

The objectives very generally stated are to provide an ecumenical base for inter-church cooperation, to coordinate community church activities, and to promote a moral and spiritual community climate based on Christian principles. Though unwritten, the evidence of these objectives is provided during bi-monthly meetings between the association and the school administration.

Although not primarily school or educationally related, the school system is important to the association in the sharing of constituents, scheduling of community events, and the common concern for the well-being of youth. School programs and church programs are coordinated and conflicts aboided through the ministerial association which creates a procedural relationship. The educational objectives of the association are related to its carefully exercised scrutiny of student, teacher, and administrator conduct, and one may not totally be accurate in allowing these objectives to be called "educational."

To test the orientation of the association's objectives one might ask if the school system were suddenly to disappear could the ministerial association carry on its work. The answer is most clearly, "Yes."

The general interests of the ministerial association as stated above in objectives remain reasonably stable over time due to the unifying thread of Christian principles, and the abiding hope for establishing religion as a community priority. However, the specific interests change with time; sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

This writer has met regularly with the association for several years, and a gradual acceptance of sex education has been emerging during that time. Currently, the association officially approves of the school's sex education curriculum. Certain individual members still hold reservations, but refrain from creating conflict. However, the discipline and conduct issue rose quickly, and maintained itself, and is currently holding at a peaceful stage. Other interests rise and fall with currency and relevancy to news and community affairs. Small changes do not produce conflict, but do require the school administration to provide accurate information and complete explanations.

With respect to schools, one must generally conclude that the association interests are relatively stable under that umbrella objective related to behavior and value oriented curriculum. Although variation occurs with personality changes in membership, the stability of the congregations tends to hold the general value orientations constant and predictable.

The association is reflected in current activities of the ministers that are multiple in nature. The format is flexible, the minds are active, and the energy is abundant. This organization is not a single-minded group with a special purpose or "axe-to-grind." With the umbrella objective constantly in mind, side-trips are welcome and adventure is not spurned; however, the limits are well known and rarily debatable within the group.

It may be fair to say that the procedural issues are met with flexibility and open-mindedness, and may give rise to different objectives. The substantive issues, however, remain constant and when variation occurs it is slowly and carefully considered.

The advent of the discipline issue made it clear that the ministers considered the new policy a means to deteriorating student behavior and contributing to the general moral decline of the community in the end. The policy changes that were requested were seen as means to reestablish authority and to teach students respect for law and order. The mental pictures of disobedient children untouched by the paddle created larger images of future parents lawless and unchurched rearing children without conscience of fear. The outcry was not directed as much at the policy provision that limited spanking of students, but at the awesome consequences imagined from the unspanked children's behavior. This writer has no doubt, based on personal confrontation, that the association sees school policy as means rather than ends.

Ministers do not normally engage in conflict producing activities. Although it is true that the association played an instrumental role on one side of a community conflict. The sermonds to their congregations, their informal conversations in the community, and their directness with the school administration delineated the issue. Even so, the history of the association does not reflect a conflict oriented posture.

The breadth and intensity of feelings are difficult to judge and elusive to measure. According to Coleman,[11] community conflict can produce polarization of social relations, formation of partisan organizations, and new community leaders. None of these situations have yet developed, unless one could suspect a positive correlation between the discipline issue and the increase in John Birch Society membership. One can wonder. There is, on the whole, little evidence to support a contention that serious, unhealing community conflict was fully developed during the peak of the controversy that has developed to date.

Yes, sermons were devoted to the issue. Letters to the editor, though few, reached print. School administrators were confronted by the Ministerial Association. Teacher groups met to discuss the policy and to develop a position with regard to it. However, the major activity was informal dialogue through general community conversation.

This writer was intense and harbors deep feelings about the justness and rightness of the new discipline policy;

and was called to defend its adoption. There was increased attendance at the several school board meetings during the adoption, but the audiences were controlled and rational.

III

The slumbering, but smoldering, issue of discipline remains unresolved with unknown potentials for future impact and resumption of overt community conflict. What predictions can be made based on the experience of the past and the wisdom of scholars?

The education community will deal most directly with the issue in its present state, and with whatever impact occurs. The policy is written, approved, and filed with the State Department of Education.[12] Teachers, students, and administrators will abide by the policy and derive some security from it.[13] Many school administrators agree with Campbell when he suggests that school should have policies with respect to discipline and that they should be clear with the responsibility of the teachers understood. Teachers and administrators may enforce the new policy and accept the new freedom it prescribes. One might expect a learning climate to develop that recognizes an increased respect for human dignity and an amphasis on self-discipline. The provisions of policy would

allow such a prediction and in a normal course of events, the prediction should develop into reality.

However, having suggested that the issue still smolders, one must look at the possible social and political impacts in that lack of conflict resolution.

Coleman[14] presents the criteria for community conflict in three statements:

1. The event must touch upon an important aspect of the community members' lives--education of their children, their means of livelihood, religion, taxes, or something similar.
2. The event must affect the lives of different community members differently.
3. The event must be one in which the community members feel that action can be taken--not one which leaves the community helpless.

The conflict over student discipline and conduct fulfills the first two criteria, but fails to meet the third--an event over which the community members feel that action can be taken. The opponents of the new policy now concede that parts of the liberalization of the policy are necessary due to the court decisions which guarantee students the right to due process, enforce civil rights, and prevent the tyranny of the minority view by the majority view. Some of the ministers who feel strongly that discipline should be fearful, also recognize that the school district must operate within the law and in a manner defensible in court. The issue began

to hold as the vocal opponents began to realize that local control has been superceded by State mandate and overpowered by the U.S. Constitution.

Although the issue has stalled, it cannot be considered dead. Socially, the matter remains an issue in the minds of those who find it important to quarrel with society's institutions, and in local communities, the school district is an undisguisable target. Reason to remain alert is furnished by two expert sources.

In the first place, Iannaconne and Cistone[15] report on research by Minar that found community social structure has a compelling effect on decision-making in the local school system. Communities with higher levels of better educated people in professional-managerial occupations were identified as low-conflict communities because of their larger supplies of conflict management skills and attendant attitudes.[16]

Secondly, Coleman[17] has delineated six steps in the development of community conflict:

1. The administration in power becomes the defendant in controversy.
2. A few active oppositionists, men who are continually in opposition, oppose the administration. These men are sometimes motivated by the hope of power, but they are ideologically committed to a "cause."
3. A large group exists—often the majority of people—who are ordinarily inactive, acquiescent to the administration, but not actively supporting it.

4. An active group exists, usually a minority of the population, who continually support administrative policies, and who were responsible for putting the administration in office.
5. The large possive group, or a part of it becomes active in one of two ways: a change in general climate of opinion; administration commits a series of blunders.
6. The ideologically-commited, active oppositionist is not able to use this new hostile atmosphere to gain his ends.

In an attempt to synthesize the two sources and apply that synthesis to the local issue, one can see the rural, self-contained community with a low percentage of professional people as lacking conflict resolution skills. The recess in conflict issue may be, then, the result of its being harbored within professional men, the ministers, who do have conflict resolution skills. If one analyses the issue to be in a state of recess or stalled at one of the stages of conflict development, then it could be reasonably seen as resting at stage five waiting for the administration to err or for some change of opinion to take place. If another group, less professional than ministers, takes hold of the issue the matter may come in from recess very soon.

A large, passive group may be inferred from the support for school budgets when one notes that the margin of approval was passed by a 56 vote margin,[18] and that 33 percent of the

registered voters cast ballots.[19] These figures indicate a normal to above normal voter turn-out. Can this definately suggest that within the community their lies a large, passive group? The evidence is speculative and fragmentary, but one must not naively assume that the issue of discipline is resolved socially or politically, and totally unrelated to the vote. It can be asserted that from what is known about community conflict that the potential for the recess in conflict to end and the conflict move into the final stages is a reasonable prediction and one to cause school administrators concern. The vote, alone, is not suggested as the evidence, but an indication that administrative support is not overwhelmingly reflected in the polls.

Again, Coleman[20] provides insight into the nature of society in relation to such conflicts:

> "At this point in history, only a few things are clear; there are two systems of relations coexisting in modern society, there are important problems at their numerous points of contact, and there are ways to reduce the seriousness of these problems. There is the objective fact that persons have lost control over some of the events important to them, there is the subjective fact that distant and distantly controlled events are increasingly important to persons. And there are ways that persons can regain a sense of control."

The potential impact of the social and political worlds of a small community lie in those last ominous words, "And there are ways that persons can regain a sense of control." Only the lack of method to gain control lies between peace and conflict in the discipline issue. When the issue rises again among people less professional than ministers, and when there appears to be a method for change, the conflict may resume more uncontrolled and dangerous in its transformation.

Solutions do not present themselves abundantly or clearly marked. Complications arise by the weight of law, constitutional rights and civil liberties on the side of the adopted policy. A compromise between the opposing views is not available because the School Board cannot act contrary to law or establish policy denying due process to its constituents.

Sanders[21] talks about accomodation as the process used for easing conflict so that people who have been wasting their energies fighting each other can get busy doing something else. He continues that rationale men begin to seek a way out of impasse; it usually means that each party to the conflict has to yield some ground in order to develop working qrrangements again.[22] This solution does not seem available for the reasons cited above.

One very general approach to solution would be to maintain the school district as an open system.[23] Defined by Miles, an open system is a bounded collection of interdependent parts, devoted to the accomplishment of some goals , with parts maintained in a steady state in relation to each other

and the environment by means of (1) standard modes of operation, and (2) feedback from the environment about the consequence of system actions. The school district as an open system can maintain balance with the community, reflect community views and avoid confrontations arising from ignorance and lack of information.

Narrowing the open system concept as a resolution technique and making it operational, the school district can use community opinion polls. The point is illustrated by quoting Thomas, Smith, and Hall:[24]

> "The result of no information or the wrong kind of information is the creation of a gap between a community and the administrator of its schools. This gap results in misunderstanding, distrust, and . . . defeated school budgets. As an added dimension, the troublesome situation works both ways: the same problems that keep information from flowing <u>out</u> also keep information from flowing <u>in</u>. The result is that the administrator knows as little about what the community <u>thinks</u> as the community knows about what the administrator is <u>doing</u>."

Correctly conducted through personal interviews, the community survey could provide one solution to holding the discipline issue at rest. The exchange of information could build good will, provide outlets for discontent, signal the administration when trouble brews, and possibly arrest the

the development of the active opposing majority needed to nudge the conflict development into a higher gear.

The costs are sufficient to warrant scrutiny by budget board members, and of a nature to be difficult to justify, since it does not relate directly to the instruction of students. The cost to a district for a survey program could be as much as $2000.[25] The end value is adequately significant to be worth the effort needed to include funds in the school budget. If volunteers could be enlisted and trained as interviewers the cost would be negligible and the device becomes most attractive.

The community survey can be an on-going activity conducted on a regular, periodical basis thus contributing to a degree of permanence. The permanence of the solution will lie in the answers the survey obtains revealing the mood and tenor of the community attitude toward schools and the sense of contribution created in community members.

Piele[26] cites research studies that clearly indicate that individuals who have relatively strong community ties and who feel that they contribute to community and educational decision-making are likely to support school issues. The weight of this evidence supports community surveying as a viable method ro reduce community conflict.

Anticipating some negative reaction to interviewers creating a suspciion of manipulation on the paranoid factions in the community, the interviewers should be carefully selected and highly trained in order to extract a maximum of positive

value and avoid the creation of negative side-effects.

A tempting solution lies in the election of a ministerial association member to the school board. According to this plan, then, that member would gain insight into the nature of the discipline issue from a different perspective, act as the opposition spokesman creating for them a sense of belonging, and eventually dispel the objections to the issue. The financial apsects, the time factors, and side-effects are negligible factors since they occur in the normal process of school operation. The solution would last as long as the cooptation existed with potential for a long life.

However, though tempting, this writer cannot suggest cooptation of this type as a serious solution to resolve the discipline conflict issue. Even though, the election of a minister to the School Board would be a positive action, it would likely not offer resolution to the issue since there is reason to anticipate conflict to resume its development from another sector of the community. When the conflict resumes, if it resumes, less professional, more emotional people are likely to initiate the action, and the minister-board member will be aligned with the defense. Obvious as it may appear, one cannot genuinely consider cooptation as viable to holding the discipline issue in a quiet stage.

IV

Community conflict arising from disagreements over student discipline and conduct may be inevitable and resist attempts at resolution. Indeed, Scherer[27] states that conflict is necessary, that there are many types of conflict, and that conflict can be beneficial.

The values generating positions on either side of the issue are deeply felt and firmly rooted. External communication methods, though valid and honest, may maintain the open system and dilute the conflict to a single issue, but there is reason to believe that the positions cannot be altered or explained away. The openness of the school system may prevent or retard the conflict from generalizing to other issues and degenerating to name-calling, but the values held by people with conviction and integrity cannot be mollified.

If the system is truly open and the feedback is objectively analyzed, opinions are truly considered, and people accepted as whole people with valid contributions to make, the school system will be strong and able to survive conflict. The hopeful view would turn conflict into dialectical growth where the opponents interact to make the system grow.

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